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AUTHOR Ingersoll, Berit
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ABSTRACT

Social scientists tend to adopt either a qualitative or a quantitative perspective in research on social support. As single methods, each perspective has unique distinctions, limitations, and trade-offs. These approaches are based on differing epistemological assumptions. Qualitative research attempts to understand human behavior from the perspective of the respondent. Quantitative research attempts to understand human behavior from a generalized cause and effect perspective. The former method tends to sacrifice breadth for depth, while the latter sacrifices individuality for an explanation of the larger social phenomena. A research continuum which moves from qualitative/quantitative to quantitative/qualitative would balance the two methods. At the far left of the continuum (qualitative/quantitative), the research mode would be called exploring the parameters. The far right of the continuum (quantitative/qualitative) would be called suggesting interpretations. The third research mode in which qualitative and quantitative occur simultaneously would be referred to as providing examples. Each mode uses part of the qualitative perspective to provide a fuller understanding of quantitative findings. Data from qualitative research can help suggest interpretation and can enrich our understanding of the frequencies and statistical tests of quantitative research. (Examples of each of these modes, as found in the current social support literature, are provided.) (BL)

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Approaches to Combining Quantitative and Qualitative
Social Support Research

Berit Ingersoll, Ph.D
Survey Research Center
The University of Michigan

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Introduction

There is often a tendency to talk about social support as though it were a unitary concept. An awareness of the multifaceted nature of social support indicates that restraint should be exercised in making generalizations from studies that have adopted a single measure of social support. Gaining a better understanding of how social support might aid in the adjustment of community residents is a complex task. The development of comprehensive and differentiated methods of assessing support might provide a framework for improving our understanding of these processes, which appear to have such important variables (Barrera, 1981).

Too often as social scientists, we become wedded to a single method of research which narrows our perspective on a phenomenon. The research on social support exemplifies this tradition in that most researchers adopt either a qualitative or a quantitative perspective. As Jick (1979) points out, graduate training prepares students to use one method or the other but there is little emphasis on combining methods. Furthermore, those who use multiple methods generally do not explain how they have blended their qualitative and quantitative data. This paper will: 1) outline some of the major distinctions between qualitative and quantitative research and discuss the methodological tradeoffs involved when using each; 2) suggest various approaches for blending the qualitative and the quantitative perspectives; and 3) provide examples of each approach from research on social support.

Distinctions and Methodological Tradeoffs

Frequently, social support researchers introduce a few subjective measures into their study to assess respondents' feelings about their network. These measures are then referred to as qualitative measures and are exemplified by items such as satisfaction with friends and

family (Duff & Hong, 1980), satisfaction with support and how much it is needed (Barerra, 1981), and the degree to which respondents can self-disclose (Moriwaki, 1973). These are qualitative measures which can be quantified. They should, however, be distinguished from the qualitative approach to research which is, in fact, quite distinct from the quantitative approach.

Both approaches are based upon differing epistemological assumptions (Smith, 1983; Suransky, 1980). Reichardt and Cook (1979) summarize the attributes of these two world views. They point out that qualitative research has generally been characterized as "grounded, discovery oriented, exploratory, expansionistic, descriptive and inductive" while quantitative research is often considered "ungrounded, verification-oriented, confirmatory, reductionistic, inferential and hypothetico-deductive" (p. 10). The qualitative approach subscribes to a phenomenological concern for understanding human behavior from the perspective of the respondent while the quantitative approach is based upon a logical positivist perspective which emphasizes the causes and effects of social phenomena (Bogdon and Taylor, 1975). Hence each methodological approach contributes distinct benefits to understanding the social world. Qualitative research provides data which is frequently called "valid, real, rich and deep" while quantitative research results in information which is often referred to as "reliable, hard and replicable" (Reichardt & Cook, 1979).

To accomplish their goals, researchers from each perspective make substantial tradeoffs (McClintock, Brannon and Maynard-Moody, 1979). Qualitative researchers sacrifice breadth for depth. They obtain intimate knowledge concerning the social world of those they are

studying but their approach is time-consuming and thus their attention must be focused on a limited number of people. Quantitative survey research, because of its use of large representative samples, supplements qualitative, in-depth research (McCallister & Fischer, 1978). Quantitative research results in findings which are generalizable but makes other tradeoffs. Three of these tradeoffs will be discussed in the context of social support research.

First, quantitative researchers, with their use of structured interviews, define the research questions. Thus respondents have limited opportunity to pose the issues or questions they regard as most salient. As survey researchers interested in social support, the quantitative researchers assume they know the components of social support. Survey researchers might, for example, ask respondents how many confidants they have without identifying what aspects of social support are most crucial for the respondent. The qualitative approach, however, is based on the notion that the perspective of the respondents should play an important role in formulating the research questions. Becker and Geer (1960) contrast these two approaches when they note,

A respondent in an unstructured interview is more likely to provoke a discovery by saying something unexpected than is the respondent who can only check one of six precoded replies to a questionnaire item. Techniques which maximize the possibility of coming upon unexpected data include the free or unstructured interview and participant observation (p. 268).

The qualitative perspective is particularly conducive to a method of inquiry which focuses on issues which are salient to the informants' point of view (Hollenshead, 1982).

Second, quantitative researchers assume that questions have similar meanings for respondents. In one large survey, for example, the

researchers were surprised that some respondents began talking about television programs in response to a question about social networks. Clearly, the respondents' understanding of a network was different from that of the researchers'. These kinds of confusions regarding meaning and interpretation are less likely to occur within the qualitative perspective because searching for meaning is of central importance to qualitative research (Hollenshead, 1982). In his description of one kind of qualitative research, experiential field work, Rowles (1978) emphasizes the importance of the interpretive process,

Insights may stem from interpretation of events or facets of experience mutually explored by the participants. The dialog itself becomes data, reflecting an inductive process as two individuals seek consensual expression of their interpersonal knowing (p. 187).

Finally, quantitative researchers often assume that the respondents' words have limited importance. They tend to translate words into numbers and then begin thinking about frequencies, thus losing the human experience and context from which the frequencies are derived. The qualitative researchers, however, consider the words of the respondents as a crucial source of data. One such researcher cautions, "In our eagerness to dissect, to categorize, to interpret, we often forget that each life has an integrity of its own" (Rowles, 1978, p. 181). Focusing on the words of respondents allows for a better grasp on their unique life experiences.

Three Modes of Blending Qualitative and Quantitative Research

The tradeoffs made by quantitative research can be counterbalanced by benefits from qualitative research. There are numerous ways in which quantitative and qualitative research can be combined such that they complement each other and enhance our understanding of social support

phenomena. Three modes of combining will be presented here to reflect the tradeoffs described above.

These three modes can be conceived of within a continuum (see Figure 1).

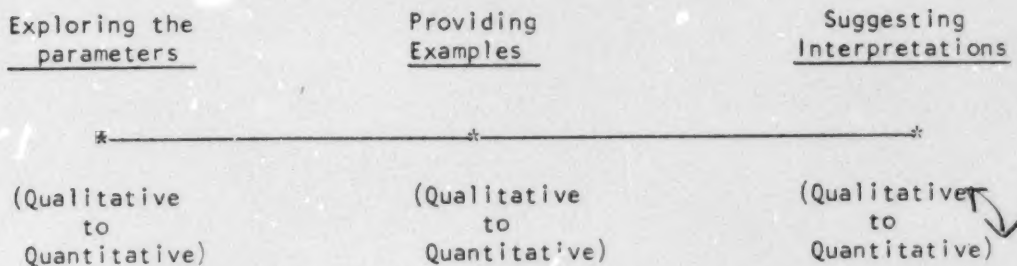


Figure 1. Modes of Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Research.

On one end of the continuum, qualitative research can be used in an exploratory manner to help define the parameters of a problem area which is then followed by quantitative research. On the other end, we can begin with quantitative research and use qualitative research to help provide interpretation and understand the meanings that were derived from the quantitative research. Finally, in the middle of the spectrum, we can think of using the two perspectives concomitantly which results in independent but simultaneous use of quantitative and qualitative research. In this case, qualitative research provides examples of quantitative research findings which are grounded in the words and experiences of the respondents.

We can refer to the first mode that starts with qualitative research and moves to quantitative as "exploring the parameters." The second, which starts with quantitative and moves toward qualitative research can be called "suggesting interpretations." The third, where the two occur simultaneously, can be referred to as "providing examples." From the social support literature, it is possible to find

at least one example of each mode of combining qualitative and quantitative research.

Exploring the parameters - Benjamin Gottlieb (1978) has done research on the social supports of welfare mothers. He began by asking the mothers to think about their lives, and then to describe any personal or important problems they had. Having done that, he then asked them to talk about who it was who helped them and what it was that was most helpful. These answers from the respondents were gathered and thematized into 26 categories which Gottlieb eventually collapsed into 4 kinds of social support: emotionally sustaining kinds of support, problem solving support, indirect personal influence (just knowing the helper was there whether or not s/he actually helped), and environmental action (doing something on behalf of the person who needs support).

These categories provided a framework upon which further quantitative research could be conducted. For example, quantitative analyses indicated that only 10% of the individuals who provided support to the welfare mothers were formal (mental health) helpers. Additionally, the vast majority (75%) of one kind of support, emotionally sustaining support, could be described by three kinds of help -- unfocused talking, listening and reflective understanding.

Suggesting interpretations. - The use of quantitative research to focus on particular problem areas which can then be examined for their qualitative meaning is exemplified by some research I conducted on the social support of retirees (Ingersoll, 1982). This research relied upon a national probability sample of older adults. The survey asked each individual how many people in their network provided them with different forms of social support including confiding, respect, reassurance,

talking when upset, talking about their health, and sick care. From these data an interesting gender difference emerged. Retired women indicated that more people respected them than did their male counterparts.

A qualitative study, based upon in-depth interviews, followed in which participants were asked to explain what they meant by the different kinds of social support which had been operationally defined in the quantitative study. The gender differences regarding respect which emerged in the quantitative data were illuminated by the qualitative study. Several men spoke of respect in terms of their accomplishments and in the context of hierarchical relationships while women spoke of respect in terms of those who considered their thoughts and feelings. For example, one man said that people respected him by ". . . recognizing what I have done, what I can do, what I have accomplished." Said one woman, "If they want to be with me, I feel that must be a kind of respect and that's really the only kind of respect that I'm concerned with." Another woman explained, "If there's love, there's respect." Thus the findings from the qualitative study helped further our understanding of the quantitative data by showing that men and women differed in the meanings they attributed to respect. Women's definitions of respect were more all-inclusive of their network than was those of men.

Providing examples - This third form of integration, characterized by qualitative and quantitative research conducted simultaneously (though published at different times), is exemplified by the research of Cobb and Kasl (1977) and Slote (1969). The first study relied on quantitative measures comparing the social support, physical health, and

mental health of 237 men. Some of these men were losing their jobs when their factories closed and the others were not. The second was a qualitative study of in-depth interviews based upon the experiences of 31 of the unemployed men.

The quantitative study looked at how the social supports, physical and mental health of these two groups (the employed and the unemployed) differed. For mental health, the researchers had a variety of paper and pencil indices, which indicated that the social support of the unemployed men decreased initially and that they had lower self-esteem, and higher anxiety, tension, irritability, anger, and suspicion. Their physical health, which was based upon a variety of lab tests, indicated that there was an increase in pulse rate, among the unemployed men and that they had higher levels of nor-epinephrine, which is an indicator of stress. Also, there was a higher incidence of suicide, heart attacks, and loss of hair among the unemployed group.

The qualitative study, conducted independently from the quantitative, provided an in-depth description of these men's experiences and allowed the study participants to tell their story. For example, while the quantitative study gives a hint of the mental anguish of these men, the qualitative study puts into words the experience of the men. In the words of a retired plant manager who was haunted by memories of the impact of the closing on his men,

I guess some of them are not doing so well but I am not doing so well either. I was sick emotionally and physically when I came down here. I'd done just what I'd advised people for years not to do when they retired. I burned my bridges. But there are just some bridges that won't burn, aren't there? (Slote, 1969, p. 11)

Similarly, as indicated by the quantitative study, the men's physical distress also increased during the plant closing. For example,

a few men were so distressed by the plant closing that they lost their hair. The human anguish associated with this physical problem is made much more real when we hear the story of one man who experienced the loss of his hair. Slote (1969) describes his experience:

He felt the top of his head. What the devil is going on? He got out of bed and went to the bedroom mirror. He stared. His hair was falling - had fallen - out in clumps. Patches of bare skin shone in the overhead light. My God, Norma, I'm sick.

He lay in bed and stared at the ceiling and every once in a while he'd pass his hand over his scalp and feel the skin and once another clump of hair came off in his hand and he was scared and frightened, because he knew he was sick now, real sick. He was sure he was going to die. (p. 124)

Taken together, the words and experiences of the study respondents emphasize and reify the human experience which is suggested by the quantitative findings.

Conclusion

It must be acknowledged in combining research based upon the qualitative and quantitative perspectives that we are incorporating varying epistemological assumptions. Some (Smith, 1983) feel that these assumptions are too divergent to combine while others (Morgan and Smircich, 1980) suggest that these assumptions represent a spectrum of epistemological approaches. I am of the second opinion and believe that we need not make either/or choices between qualitative and quantitative approaches to research. Instead, we can acknowledge the differences in the world views of the different perspectives while appreciating how each perspective further illuminates and enhances the findings of the other.

This paper has described three modes of blending qualitative and quantitative research -- exploring parameters, suggesting

interpretations and providing examples. Each mode uses part of the qualitative perspective to provide a fuller understanding of quantitative findings. In sum, qualitative research can be used to help focus on specific research questions to be addressed by quantitative research. Data from qualitative research can help suggest interpretation for quantitative results. Additionally, qualitative research can help enrich our understanding of the frequencies and statistical tests from quantitative research by providing descriptions of respondents' thoughts and behaviors. Each of these modes of combining qualitative and quantitative research appears to have considerable potential for furthering our understanding of social support.

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